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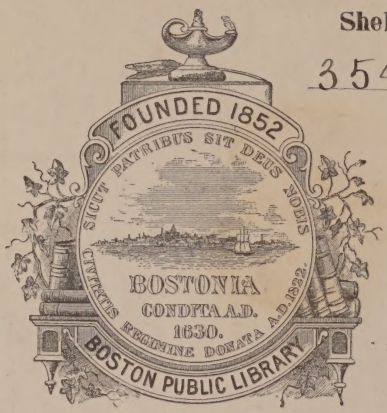

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A Parish Retrospect

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A PARISH RETROSPECT

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A SERMON

PREACHED IN ST. JAMES' CHURCH, ROXBURY, ON THE OCCASION OF THE TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF HIS RECTORSHIP,

JANUARY 24, 1892

BY

THE REV. PERCY BROWNE

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SERMON.

On this twentieth anniversary of my rectorship, while our mutual interest is naturally concerned with the twenty years dating from 1872, it need not confine itself to that period. Let us go back in sympathy to the beginnings of this good parish which has lived and worked since 1832, just sixty years. Nearly one hundred years ago, however, long before the birth of St. James, a fruitless effort was made to establish the Episcopal Church in Roxbury, but it was in 1832, just forty years after that effort of a hundred years ago, that our parish actually came into existence. At that time the population of Roxbury was about five thousand. There were in the town only four buildings for public worship, — that known as the "First Church," on Eliot Square, also one of each of

the Baptist and Universalist denominations. The small group of Episcopalians interested in founding St. James' Church held their first service in the stone building, then used as the "Female High School," now known as the office of the Roxbury Gas Company. The initial Service was held on the 13th of May, 1832, and was conducted by the Rev. Geo. W. Doane, who afterwards became the Bishop of New Jersey. The congregation on that occasion, although numbering but thirty persons, must have been an energetic and devoted group, for we find them within a few months organized into a parish under the rectorship of the Rev. Mark A. De Wolfe Howe, who is still living as the honored Bishop of Central Pennsylvania.

The infant parish was fortunate in its first Rector who served it from 1832 to 1847. Those who know Bishop Howe today know just what qualities enabled him to root and strengthen the Church in this neighborhood. He brought to his work a persistent, undiscourageable will, a missionary spirit, then very rare, the special fruit of which was the establishment of St. John's Church, Jamaica Plain, which gladly

recognizes St. James as its mother. He had a preaching power of great clearness and force; a delicate tact — that sense of touch without which many a good man has failed in the ministry; and, above all, he had a clear perception of the power of the Church as lying in its presentation of the living Christ, free from excessive theological definitions, and in its recognition of the instinct of worship by providing a liturgy whose every word speaks of God and God-like things, — whose every Psalm and chant and prayer touch man's deepest spring of adoration. This loyalty to the Church's central power and purpose saved him from the weakness of attaching value to the extremes of churchmanship in the direction of either excess or defect, and enabled him to represent the Church's spirit to this community as concerned with the real interests of spiritual life rather than with questions of mere aesthetics or disputed points of theology. That is to say, his churchmanship was directed by sanctified common sense, which is not the least of God's gifts to those whom He makes useful in His service. With this admirable equipment, Bishop

Howe here in Roxbury entered upon his work. We cannot recall the details of his fifteen years' rectorship, but it is well to remember that the founding of a new parish in the vicinity of Boston sixty years ago was an arduous task, requiring peculiar energy and wisdom in both Rector and people. At that period there was no local Church atmosphere to nourish the infant plant. The Episcopal Church was numerically small. It was, in fact, represented by the four parishes of Christ Church, Trinity, St. Paul's and Grace Church, numbering, in all, 634 communicants. Moreover, Episcopacy as an institution was not in good repute. It was burdened with the odium of having been on the wrong side during the Revolution. In the other Colonies, especially in Virginia, our Church was in full accord with the national spirit, but in Boston it was distinctly and unflinchingly opposed to it. This was because at that time many of its members in the Massachusetts Colony were of English birth, and nearly all its ministers withdrew to Canada or England during the Revolutionary War, since they felt unable conscientiously to ignore their oath of allegiance to the

Crown of England, embodied in their ordination vows. We can well believe that the odium of this hostility or indifference to the aspirations of the young nation was a greater hinderance to the growth of the Episcopal Church in New England, than was the popular suspicion of its Romanizing tendency, due to ignorance of its real character. Both causes, however, for many years retarded its progress; and, in 1832, when our parish was founded, the cloud of historic and doctrinal suspicion was only just beginning to pass away.

Bishop Howe, twenty years ago, told me the story of those early days of St. James, with the enthusiastic interest with which a soldier tells of a difficult but successful campaign. When I met him, last June, in his ripe old age, he seemed to dwell not so much on the difficulties of his work as on the memory of those who shared them with him. The venerable Bishop looked back to his ministry here as a period especially endeared to him by the memory of those, who, sixty years ago, gave to the nurture of this parish their energy and faith. We can well believe that his high estimate of the originators

of St. James was true to the facts. Those early parishioners could not have rooted and sustained the young parish as they did, in such uncongenial soil, unless they had possessed the hopefulness, courage, and self-sacrificing energy ascribed to them by the memory of their first Rector.

In looking over the parish list from 1832 to 1847, one recognizes many names at that time influential in the town of Roxbury, whose descendants today are an important element in the Church life of Boston. Amongst them, and of especial interest, I may with propriety mention the names of Amory and Lee — names representing a family who took the leading part in founding our parish, and who, during sixty years to the present hour, have never faltered in their devotion to it. If, however, I check a natural desire to speak more fully of all that their generous loyalty has been to St. James, and to tell of their prompt, never-failing participation in every parish enterprise, their constant help given to the Church's larger missionary work everywhere, and their efforts towards helping and lifting up the poor in our midst, — if I hesitate to tell the full story of

their relation to our parish from the date of its foundation to the present hour, and what an element of strength my own ministry has found in their loyal sympathy, it is because we must respect the modesty which always characterizes such devotion to the work of Christ. Not the least of the pleasures of this anniversary occasion is the knowledge that such representatives of the founders of this venerable parish are with us still. Of one of that group — Gen. Wm. Raymond Lee, whom God has taken — I spoke at length a few weeks ago; but his is a name so indentified with our whole parish history, as one of its founders, as a Vestryman for nearly sixty years, and Senior Warden for nearly twenty, that it cannot be lightly dismissed on an occasion like the present. We are glad to pay our tribute to his memory in the words of the following minute recorded at a recent meeting by his associates in the Vestry: —

"We, the members of the Vestry of St. James' Church, on behalf of the parish, desire to record the following expression of regard for the memory of our late Senior Warden, Gen. Wm. Raymond Lee.

In his death we feel the loss of one who for half a century gave to our parish the benefit of his counsel, the help of his generosity, the example of a devout worshipper, and the inspiration of his Christian character, in which we recognized his faith manifesting itself in the practical fruits of an upright, manly, unostentatious fulfilling of the teaching of our Lord. We recall with pride and gratitude his services to our country in the civil war, in which he bravely fought and greatly suffered. We remember his devotion to the interests of the Diocese, shown in the faithful fulfillment of his duties as delegate to the Diocesan Convention through a long series of years. We recall with affectionate appreciation the genial and courteous spirit which characterized his association with us in the common work of directing and enlarging the influence of the parish in which he spent the greater part of his life.

In his death we are sensible of having lost from our midst a brave Christian man, faithful to his Church and country. In behalf of the whole parish of St. James, we desire to express this estimate of our late associate whose memory we cherish with

affectionate admiration, and to express to his bereaved family our sincere sympathy with them at this time of their sorrow."

Upon the resignation of Bishop Howe in 1846, the Rev. John Wayland, D. D., became the second Rector of the parish, then in its fifteenth year. If the old parish records were fuller then they are; if recorded lists of names and official duties could disclose to us that human interest and spiritual energy of which they are but inadequate symbols, then one could tell something of the ministry of Dr. Wayland as it filled the eleven years from 1848 to 1859. But the old pages of the Church books give us only the official entries. Still, as I read, traced in faded ink, the merest external record of his work, the names of worshippers and communicants, the names of those whom he ministered to, the children held in his arms at baptism, the young and old whom he led to the holy rite of confirmation, the names of those young hearts joined by him in marriage, and of those at whose graves he uttered the Church's words of eternal faith and

hope — the old faded record of more than forty years ago, to one who knows how much deep heart history is written there, becomes eloquent of the faithful ministry of a man whom many in Boston still recall with reverent affection.

At the close of Dr. Wayland's rectorship, in 1859, the Rev. George S. Converse entered upon those twelve years of his ministry which formed a distinct epoch in the history of St. James. Dr. Converse brought to his task those qualities, then in their youthful vigor, which have characterized his whole ministry, and which are manifest today in his work at St. John's, Tremont Street. He came gifted with a trained talent for organization, full of missionary zeal, and alive to that sense of the Church's spiritual purpose, "which prevents organization from hardening into mere machinery, and missionary zeal from evaporating into mere sentiment." It was inevitable that a man of such qualities should have strengthened, inspired, and expanded our parish, and carried it well forward into that larger life of usefulness which it enjoys today. And he did. Those of you who worked with him know it, and the records show it.

He taught the people under his charge to adopt those methods of organization which gather into united channels the separate streams of individual Christian effort which otherwise accomplish so little. He led his people, also, to respond to the demands of the Church's missionary instinct, and to recognize their duty towards the uncared-for parts of their own familiar Roxbury. As a result the parish entered into its period of systematized charities and missionary enterprises, with a delight in it all which proved the presence of the Divine Spirit blessing and cheering the willing workers and cheerful givers.

The most notable result of those energetic years is seen in the parish of St. John's, which was then begun as a Mission of St. James, and which was supported by many parishioners who are gone, and by some who are still with us, until it became an independent Church 1872 — the first year of my rectorship. It is true some of those who worshipped in this building at that time may have wished that the money given to those larger Christian needs might be restrained from its nobler use and spent in making the interior of the old Church less uncomfort-

able and ugly. But there is no record of such a demand. On the contrary there is the record of willing sacrifice for something more nobly imperative than the needs of comfort and taste. I like to think that the generosity, which, in recent years, without neglecting those higher demands, has enlarged and beautified our dear old parish, is all the more sacred because of such parentage. But I must not dwell longer on the ministry of my immediate predecessor — a ministry not only of organization and missionary activity, but also fruitful of those elements of character which always respond to the faithful preaching of the Gospel — although these few words are wholly inadequate to express my sense of the value of what this parish has gained in usefulness and spirituality from the faithful work and pure example of a man who gave it the best twelve years of his life.

Dr. Converse resigned in 1871, and nearly a year elapsed before the beginning of my rectorship on the third Sunday after Epiphany, 1872, just twenty years ago today. During that interval the parish had lost ground a little, as all parishes do under similar con-

ditions. Some worshippers had wandered away. A few good workers had detached themselves in order to give much-needed help to the Mission on Tremont Street. The machinery of parish work had become loosened. But the Vestry which welcomed the new Rector remained strong and united. The Senior Warden was B. D. Washburn; the Junior Warden was Atherton T. Brown. Henry Emmons, who died in 1883, was Treasurer. Danforth C. Hodges was Clerk. The other members of the Vestry were Samuel Walker, who died in 1880; General William Raymond Lee, whom we laid to rest a few weeks ago; George Dunbar; Wilson Dibblee, now connected with St. John's Church; and I. T. Barrow, now living in New York. As I recall my first association with those representatives of the congregation, I am conscious of inability to express my sense of indebtedness to them. No body of men could have done more than they did to encourage the new Rector. From the first they gave him the strengthening influence of their full, unstinted confidence. If I could recount all that the Vestry collectively, and that some of its members

individually, did to make easy my transfer to my work here, you would understand why I love to think of those happy days — when we all seemed young together, "with hope like a pillar of fire before us, its dark side as yet unturned." It was an initiation under the auspices of warm, generous-hearted men, which from the first gave the lie to the charge of unsympathetic coldness so often made against Boston people by those who do not know them. I rejoice that there are still with us three members of that Vestry of 1872 — who to the present hour have never faltered in their devotion to the interest of their parish, nor in loyal friendship for its Rector.

The period of which I speak had, however, some elements of discouragement. One recalls them now only to deepen the pleasure of remembering how they were gradually overcome. The parish had lost some members. There was no visible equipment for doing good, organized Church work. There was no Chapel, no Industrial room, no Sunday School room, no Choir room. There were only the Church building and a very small robing-room. Remembering all this, one wonders how so much earnest work was

carried on during Dr. Converse's ministry. The only solution I can think of is that which explains so many wonders of Christian effort, viz: "that where there is a will there is a way." In addition to this lack of equipment, the interior of the Church was of a character to depress rather than stimulate one in the hour of worship. The exterior of St. James has always satisfied the eye by its air of calm, dignified beauty. But the interior at that time was in jarring contrast with it. Some of you can recall with amused interest those bare untinted walls; the meaningless gallery, extending across the whole north end of the building; those ancient high-backed narrow-seated pews, the wood work of which, white by original intention, had degenerated to the depths of discoloration through long use; and the upholstery of all shades of green, blue, and red, each separate pew being furnished according to the individual taste of some previous occupant, and bearing testimony to that independence of individual character for which Boston is celebrated. Moreover, this picture of musty and variegated discomfort was flooded with the glaring light pouring

in through plain, uncolored windows, whose only decorations were the undisturbed dust and fluttering cobwebs. Another element of discouragement was found in the struggle of the Sunday School to exist without a suitable room. Its few and scattered classes met in the Church building, each class leading a separate and lonely life in one or other of those high-backed pews. I remember the sense of depression with which first I saw, or rather failed to see, that hidden Sunday School of twenty years ago. The Superintendent indeed insisted against all appearances that a Sunday School was really in session. But its presence had to be accepted wholly as a matter of faith until exploration amongst the ancient pews made it, dimly, a matter of sight. A little later, however, under the admirable superintendentship of our present Clerk, the scattered and hidden classes were brought into visibility and unity with each other, and the School started on that energetic career which it has maintained ever since.

All these depressing circumstances made one feel the need of some signs of encouragement which soon appeared. The problem of providing a place for the

work of the societies and various parish meetings was met at once by the private enterprise of three members of the parish, who provided a beautiful and spacious rectory on ample grounds, situated on Walnut Avenue. This private generosity had also in view the hope that soon a new St. James might be built on the ground thus provided. But the disastrous fire of 1872 destroyed that hope. Nevertheless, the rectory was, for seven years, allowed to remain as the Rector's happy home. These were the years when so many parishioners learned to know each other through the parish meetings of all kinds held there. There was where the old Missionary Society, Employment and Benevolent Society, and Aid Society used to meet and plan and do their work. There, too, the Men's Guild, numbering forty members, used to assemble for purposes of social fellowship. The surrender of the hope of a new Church had, however, the good effect of stimulating the energies of the parish to improve the present building. Before my rectorship was a year old, the old gallery was removed, the unsightly windows replaced by the present ones, and the white pews recolored to produce some-

thing like unity of tone, thus beginning those successive improvements which culminated last year in the building of the Choir-room.

In 1876, at the request of our late Bishop, I undertook the work of establishing the infant mission known as St. Ann's, Dorchester, in a suitable Church building. It is true St. James was not asked to furnish either funds or workers for this enterprise. All the necessary money was collected from other sources; but I am sure I could not have secured it, nor have carried on the work of the mission, as I gladly did for many years,* if our Vestry had not by formal vote stood sponsor for the enterprise, and given me its moral support. By reason of such support in my work of supervising the mission of St. Ann's, until it became independent some eight years ago, St. James stands credited with the establishment of her third Church, the other two being St. John's, Jamaica Plain, and St. John's, Tremont Street.

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* I take pleasure in acknowledging the admirable work done in this mission by the Rev. Frederic Palmer and Rev. E. S. Rousmaniere in 1878–9; and by the Rev. J. R. Peirce for many years afterwards.

In chronological order, the next enterprise of our parish was the building of our adjoining Chapel, Industrial room, and Robing room in 1877. That was a happy year in which the old ledge of rocks was blasted away, and the Chapel raised in its place through the free gifts of the parishioners and under the special, almost daily, personal supervision of the late Henry Emmons, a man whose devotion to his Church was of the quiet, steadfast kind, which shuns observation while proving its reality by its works and labor of love. The completion of the Chapel at that time was hastened by generous contributions from the late Donald Kennedy and his family, whose connection with our parish is almost contemporaneous with its life. He needs no praise at my hands. Roxbury knew him as the public-spirited citizen who helped all her local efforts and institutions. St. James knows him and his family, as associated lovingly and effectively with its welfare for the greater number of its years, and whose strong, quiet character exerted that charm and influence which the reality of goodness always does. We think of him and them

today with affectionate regard. Six years after the building of the Chapel, came the renovation of the interior of the Church, in 1884, giving it to us as we have it today; and last year the addition for the organ, which was removed to its present position through the generosity of one parishioner, and the Choir room built by the united efforts of all. Moving along through the years marked by those special achievements, there was that quieter, perpetual, no less important work of the parish, which cannot be told in detail, but which, so far as statistics can indicate it, may be summed up as follows: —

310 persons, including children and adults, were baptized.

374 were confirmed.

262 persons were united in marriage.

256 persons were buried.

I preached in the parish 1,420 times.

The money received from pew rents, collections, and from all sources, and paid out for the support of the Church, and for charities and missions of all kinds, has amounted to $196,880.

It is right that on an occasion like this, those condensed details and statistics should be rehearsed, because they do, in some sort, indicate the active life of our parish during my ministry,—that is to say, they do indicate that general character of this united people who have never refused to sacrifice time, energy, and means, towards carrying out whatever good work commended itself to a reasonable judgment. Let this record of the past be a prophecy of larger efforts in the future. A parish is like a person, "only it has, what we men and women vainly desire, the privilege of growing mature without any of the weakness of growing old, the ripeness of age with none of the premonitions of its decay."* St. James is sixty years old, but it is still young in energy and hope. May this brief story of its many years deepen our desire to enter into the coming time with renewed devotion to Christ, to His Church, and to the work which He has given His Church to do!

I cannot think of the past twenty years without recalling that other invisible part of our parish —

* See "The Oldest School in America," by Bishop Brooks.

those who, through the grave and gate of death have gone home to God. As I read the long list of our dead I seem to see in each remembered name an undying bond uniting us with that redeemed, universal Church in heaven whom no man can number. Some are surely worthy of special mention because of what their faith, their devotion, their consecrated characters have been in the spiritual and material history of our Church. But you will understand and respect the motive which prevents such special mention of so many beautiful lives. Let us, rather, think with affection of all who have gone. Those men and women, whose human joys and griefs and struggles were lived in our midst; those younger lives just opening their hearts to the wonder and joy of life on earth, and then stilled, to awaken to the joy of life beyond; those little children who died! whose hands we held, whose innocence was a message from heaven to us — our sacred Dead, or rather *Living*, let us call them — who in other years mingled their prayers and praises with ours in this house of God; who shared with us the tasks and sacrifices given to every follower of Christ — I

knew them all, and today their faces seem to grow distinct through all the mist of years, claiming a dear central place in our regards. Let us remember them in griefless love today.

"Why make we moan
For loss that doth enrich us yet
With upward yearnings of regret?
Bleaker than unmossed stone
Our lives were, but for this immortal gain
Of unstilled longing and inspiring pain!
As thrills of long-hushed tone
Live in the viol, so our souls grow fine
With keen vibrations from the touch divine
Of nobler natures gone."

No man can look back over a twenty years' pastorate without thanking God for the great privilege and joy of a minister's work, although all of what is deepest, most blessed in that work can never be told. To have been allowed to enter into others' lives in their joys and griefs and struggles — to have kindled hope in some hopeless hearts — to have awakened faith in God and Godlike things — to have turned some prodigal's thoughts towards his Father's house — to have helped weak hands to take hold of

Christ's strength — to have helped some eyes to renew their vision of a nobler life — to have led some souls into the "confidence of a certain faith" — into the "comfort of a reasonable, religious, and holy hope:" — in a word, to know that God may have used one's own stumbling service to aid some lives in their deepest needs, — this constitutes the real work and joy of one's ministry, and its satisfying reward. I thank God today for all that blessedness of twenty years. And if, in the retrospect, one sees the inevitable shadow which lies on all human effort — the sad sense of insufficiency and unworthiness — the haunting sense of what-might-have-been of better work — if you and I today feel that we have not done our whole duty, let us not dwell on it in transient words, nor make that easy public confession of our mutual failings, which, after all, is only a claim for easy mutual absolution. Let us rather each for himself confess it to God, who alone can forgive and restore. Our

> "Vows and longings, hopes and fears,
> Broken-hearted sighs and tears,
> Dreams of what we yet might be
> Could we cling more close to Thee,

Which, despite our faults and failings,
Help Thy Grace in its prevailings —
On Thine altar laid we leave them;
Christ, present them! God receive them!"

Today we have stood together upon a height from which we have looked at the past. Before we descend, let us draw near together, let us trust each other, let us feel anew the dear eternal fellowship of our common faith. With hearts of courage we face the future, full of uncertainties though it be for our beloved parish and for ourselves, but bright with the one satisfying certainty that the God of our fathers will be there — the "almighty Lord who is a most strong tower to those who put their trust in Him." — Unto His gracious mercy and protection we commit this dear Church and people through the coming years. "The Lord bless us and keep us. The Lord make His face to shine upon us, and be gracious unto us. The Lord lift up His countenance upon us, and give us peace, both now and forever more." Amen.